

Relapse by theamiableanachronism

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Summary: On a cold Saturday morning, Eleven receives an unexpected visitor at the cabin

Relapse

El had the flu two weeks ago.

She had never felt so awful. Every bone in her body ached and even beneath three quilts her body shivered and sweat. That wasn't to mention the awful new sensation of throwing up. Like all of her insides were burning and churning their way up her throat.

It had taken her a whole week to get well, and Jim had stayed by her side as often as he could, even taking a few days off work on her worst days. When it had all died down, he'd said she was lucky. That some people took even longer to get better. That most people "relapsed" and got it all over again.

She'd shuddered at the thought of it happening again, especially once she thought it was all over.

But she hadn't relapsed. She'd gone a whole week without any sign of flu.

Until today, when she unlocked the front door and saw who was on the other side.

She'd woken up feeling low. Today was Saturday, the one day a week she and Mike (and Jim) had designated as the one the two of them could spend together. El couldn't leave the cabin, or at least go farther than a certain point beyond it, but it didn't matter, because Mike was there and that made the tiny world inside the cabin feel a whole lot larger.

But Mike had come to see her when she had the flu, and even though she'd been happy to see him, she knew he wasn't supposed to be there. Jim had told her she was contagious and though she told Mike, he didn't care. He stayed with her until it got dark, since his mother would be wondering where he was if not at Lucas' like he'd told her.

And now he had the flu. And apparently he was one of those people who took longer to get better, because he'd already missed one of their Saturdays, and now he was missing this one.

So El wasn't feeling particularly cheerful. Jim had left a note for her on the kitchen table, reminding her to eat a healthy breakfast, a box of Shredded Wheat strategically placed on the table next to a bowl and spoon, but she didn't feel like following his instructions this morning. She opened the freezer and pulled out a box of Eggos just because he wasn't there to tell her she couldn't.

She sat on the couch, the quilt from her bed wrapped around her shoulders to keep out the mid-November chill, and munched on frozen Eggos, watching her pathetic reflection in the TV chew sadly.

And then she heard it.

Tap tap.

Tap.

Tap tap tap.

She stopped mid-chew, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

Had Mike made a quicker recovery than he'd thought? For a moment, she let herself imagine him racing out to the woods, the color back in his cheeks, the November wind blowing his hair, the anticipation of seeing her making his brown eyes gleam with excitement and love—

But then she realized it was most likely Jim, coming home after finishing the assignment that had taken him to work on a weekend.

She deflated and twitched her head, unlocking the door, trying not to feel angry at Jim for ruining her entirely imaginary scenario.

Too late, she remembered that she should probably hide her contraband and sighed before biting into another waffle, waiting for his halfhearted lecture as he opened the door with a slow creak.

But then she heard the footsteps. Too light to be Jim's. Too hesitant and out of place to be Mike's.

She turned around and felt sure she was going to throw up all over again.

There, standing alone in the doorway, hand tentatively resting on the knob, was Max.

Every muscle in El's body tensed as she stood up and took her in, the red hair that stood out like a neon sign in comparison to the muted colors of the cabin, the skateboard tucked firmly under her opposite arm, the same one that El herself had yanked out from under her feet what felt like an eternity ago, the end of a yellow sweatshirt sleeve slowly becoming balled in her fist, the blue eyes watching El as if she could explode at any moment.

Which was exactly what El felt like doing, her fingers itching to throw Max out into the light snow that covered the ground outside.

Without her powers.

But she didn't.

"You're not supposed to be here." She felt a rush of satisfaction watching Max recoil at the steel in her voice, hoping it would be enough to make the intruder leave.

But Max set her jaw, narrowing her eyes and squaring her shoulders.

"I know," she said.

"Go." El rounded the end of the couch and Max tensed.

"Wait a minute," she said, holding up a hand defensively before kicking the door shut behind her. "Just—hear me out."

El lifted her hand. "Go," she repeated and Max's eyes widened. Both her hands flew up and her skateboard hit the floor with a clatter.

"Wait! You don't even know why I came out here!"

"You're not supposed to be here," El said through gritted teeth as she advanced, twitching her head and pulling the door open, already imagining Max flying through the air the same way she had that day in the gym, her hair flying wildly in every direction. She felt the heaviness in her head, smelt the mixture of metal and salt, as the small bead of blood started down her nostril. Slowly, Max started to

lift off from the ground. Her eyes became wild with fear as she watched herself rise and drift back toward the porch. Her hands dropped, shooting out straight to steady herself.

"Whoa whoa whoa hold it! *Hold it!* Put me down!" El ignored her, lifting her still higher. "Just let me say one thing!"

As Max passed beneath the doorframe, she gripped the inside with both hands, her knuckles whitening as El pushed.

"Come on!" Max said, her face changing from white to red with the effort. "Look, I promise I'll leave if you just let me say what I came here to say! I promise!"

El's heart twitched and Mike's face flashed across her memory. She'd much rather that word, just this once, hadn't made her think of Mike like it always did. Her heart was starting to soften, some of her anger at seeing Max starting to dissipate.

But then she remembered the reason why she was so angry in the first place. Because Max had been circling Mike, smiling at Mike, *her* Mike. The Mike she'd come to see because he missed her. Because she needed to see him. Because she'd dreamed of that moment, that reunion, for 353 days, and Max had ruined it with one smug grin.

But there was no smug grin in sight now. Max was shaking, her eyes darting from El's hand to her determined face and the slow trail of blood making its way to her upper lip.

And El realized, reluctantly, that Max hadn't done anything wrong. Except coming to the cabin. Because she wanted to say one thing. Just one thing. That didn't warrant El throwing her out into the snow, no matter how much she wanted to.

Why would she come all the way out here to see someone she barely knew?

El let out a heavy internal sigh and looked up at Max, whose head was inches away from hitting the doorframe.

"Promise?" she said, raising her eyebrows sternly.

"Yeah, I promise." Max blinked, looking down at the ground. "I just—I just want to talk."

El narrowed her eyes and nodded. She lowered her hand and brought Max back down a little more roughly than she could have. Her sneakers hit the floor with a resounding thud.

"Talk."

Max swayed, holding her hands out to steady herself. "Okay," she said, walking back inside, never breaking eye contact. El slammed the door behind her and Max jumped, slowly rubbing her palms on her sweatpants before opening her mouth to speak.

"I came out here to say I think we got off on the wrong foot. Obviously," she said, glancing at the blood under El's nose.

El made no move, except to wipe the blood off on her pajama sleeve, wondering if that was all she came out here to say, and feeling the anger start to bubble up again.

"And," Max continued, regaining some of the confidence she'd had when she came through the door. "I wanted to fix things."

El frowned. "Fix things?"

Max nodded. "You know, start over." She shrugged and gave El a small smile.

El didn't return it.

Max stretched her jaw. "Okay," she said, more to herself than to El. Then she lifted her head, smiled confidently, and held out her hand. "I'm Max."

El's scowl deepened. She squinted at Max's outstretched hand, confused, while Max watched her expectantly. She'd tried this before, the night El came back. She'd held out her hand and said her name, how she'd heard so much about her.

And El had ignored her.

If it hadn't worked the first time, why was she doing it again?

"I know," El said finally.

Max let out half a chuckle and shifted her feet. "Great!" She forced a smile, but only succeeded in looking like she was in extreme pain. Finally, she dropped her hand and her smile with an exasperated sigh. "Okay, look. I don't know what it was that I did to you to make you hate me so much, but I don't even know you. I don't even know you! And here I am thinking we can just be friends or something." She looked around the room in irritation and shook her head before bending down to pick up her skateboard, muttering, "This was stupid." She straightened up and said, "Sorry I bothered you. I'm leaving now. Just like I promised." She held the edge of her hand to her forehead then flicked it toward El before turning away to grab the doorknob.

"Wait."

Max looked back at El over her shoulder. "What?"

El blinked. She hadn't planned on saying anything but the word had slipped out before she could stop it.

Why wasn't she just letting her go? She wasn't supposed to be here anyway.

But there was something about the words Max had said in a rush that was gnawing at her. And something about another memory, another one of Max at Joyce's house. Next to Dustin. Behind Lucas. Looking like she belonged there. Like she was their. . .

"Why do you want to be friends?"

Max stared for a moment before looking away and giving her head a small shake. She smirked at El with narrowed eyes.

"I don't know. I guess I thought you were a cool person." She lifted her hand, still smiling. "At least that's what I heard. I guess I was wrong." The smile disappeared and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Happy?"

El paused. "A cool person?"

Max frowned, confused. "Yeah. You did all those things, saved all those people. And you're just a kid." Her eyes shifted and she looked down. "I've never known anybody like that."

El paused, taking her in. She'd started balling her sweater sleeve in her hand again and that neon red hair had fallen in front of her face. El's eyes fell to the skateboard she had clamped in her other hand; there was a thick strip of duct tape around it, pressed down so tightly she could see the faint outline of a crack.

"What happened to your board?"

Max looked up, blinking at El before looking down at her board and touching the tape. She shrugged nonchalantly. "My stepbrother."

El frowned. "Stepbrother?"

Max frowned back. "You don't know what a stepbrother is?"

El shook her head.

She looked away then back to El. "You know what divorce means?"

El pressed her lips together.

Max watched her, suspicious again, but then said, "My real dad and mom aren't married anymore. So my mom married some other guy who already had a kid. That's my stepbrother. He's an asshole."

She said the last words almost as an afterthought and El's lips quirked. Finally, a word she knew.

"The asshole broke your board?"

Max started to smile, but caught herself and shrugged. "Yeah. Not the first time."

They watched each other for a moment. Max's hand was completely hidden by her sweater sleeve.

"Mouthbreather," El said quietly.

Max's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Your stepbrother."

Max's lips twitched. "Did you say 'mouthbreather'?"

El nodded. "A dumb person." She shrugged. "An asshole."

Amused, Max nodded. "Yeah. He is."

They looked away from each other, eyes glancing off the dusty rafters, the yellowing shades over the windows, the ratty carpet beneath their feet, anything but each other.

"I should go. Since I'm not supposed to be here," Max finally said with a significant look.

El watched her turn away again and start to open the door.

"Wait."

Max turned around, one eyebrow raised.

El swallowed and held out her hand. Max's eyes dropped to it.

"I'm El."

A slow smile curved Max's lips. She let go of the doorknob and gripped El's hand. She shook it up and down.

"Max."

El smiled. "I know."

Max's smile only widened before she let go of El's hand and opened the door, looking back over her shoulder.

"Well. See you, El."

And then she was gone.

El stood there, watching the door, a surprising calmness having fallen over her.

She frowned, searching for the churning feeling in her stomach, the tense muscles, the anger she'd felt when Max came through the door only minutes ago.

She thought of the memory of Max in the school. She narrowed her eyes, thinking that would bring it all back.

Her heart tightened, remembering the anger of that day. There was a tiny nudge in her stomach. A prick of tension in her muscles. But that was all.

She stretched her fingers, remembering the feeling of Max's hand shaking hers.

And the fact that she'd come to see her, just to be friends. To start over.

The buzz of the radio startled her out of her thoughts.

"El? Are you there? Come in, El, over."

El's heart leapt and she crossed the living room in three giant steps. She picked up the radio and answered.

"Hello, Mike. This is El, over."

"El! How are you? Over." El winced at the exhaustion in Mike's voice but her heart warmed at the brightness in it.

"Good, Mike. How are you? Over."

"Okay. I'll definitely be better by this Saturday. I'm sorry I couldn't come today." A buzz of static. "I miss you."

El smiled, her cheeks warm. "I miss you too. I'm sorry I got you sick."

Barely a second passed before Mike's concerned voice came back to her. "It's okay El, it's no problem. Don't feel bad." Another pause, then, "I'm just glad I got to see you."

"Me too."

A moment of silence passed.

"Is everything okay there, El?"

El nodded, even though she knew he couldn't see her. "Yes, I'm okay."

"Okay, good."

El paused, pursing her lips before pressing the button again.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me about Max."